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SUBJECT: OBAMA SPELLS HOPE FOR TURKEY'S HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary and comment: An array of Turkey's most prominent human rights defenders hailed the election of Barack Obama as the beginning of a new era for the advancement of human rights in Turkey and the world. In the eyes of these activists, the European Union's ability to influence the GOT to enact reforms has increased, while US policies on torture and detention have simultaneously eroded our credibility and undermined our efficacy on human rights issues. The loss of US credibility has been readily apparent to us in Turkey, where contacts have routinely excoriated our human rights officer over perceived failures of US policy during his three-year tenure. The election of Obama brings great hope to these democracy defenders. Although it is important that we dampen their somewhat unrealistic expectations, we should use their optimism and newfound goodwill as a springboard to work together to urge the GOT to focus on strengthening the protection of the freedom of expression, association, and religion. End summary and comment.

12. (C) Ozturk Turkdogan, the recently elected president of the Human Rights Association (HRA), Turkey's oldest and largest human rights organization, told us November 14 that the election of Barack Obama would usher in a new era for the protection and improvement of human rights in the world. Turkdogan said America had ceded its leadership and lost all credibility on human rights issues during the past eight years. The unilateralism of US foreign policy, invasion of Iraq, torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, and indefinite detention of suspects at Guantanamo Bay had caused the Turkish people to feel a deep antipathy toward the US, according to Turkdogan.

13. (C) Retired Ankara University Professor Baskin Oran, a renowned democracy activist, told us November 10 that the election of Obama would significantly improve Turks' negative perception of America. Oran cautioned that it would be difficult for President-elect Obama to meet the incredibly high expectations the world has placed on him, telling us bluntly that, "Obama will have a hell of a job cleaning up the mess." Oran believes that the European Union's focus on the need for Turkey to improve its human rights record had been more effective than the USG's "geo-strategic" approach to Turkey. He urged us to place more focus on human rights in our relationship with Turkey.

14. (C) Human Rights Agenda Association President Orhan Kemal Cengiz told us that the State Department's annual human

rights report had been eclipsed in importance by the European Union's annual progress report. The more detailed US report used to garner great attention in Turkey but in recent years had been "ignored" by the human rights community, media, and politicians, while Turkey paid greater attention to the EU progress report. During a recent visit to the southeastern city of Sanliurfa, HRA Sanliurfa President Sedate Gozkiran told us that civil society groups in the Southeast respect visiting EU delegations because the EU is genuinely interested in improving human rights. These groups view visiting US groups with suspicion because they believe US policy is driven solely by the desire to advance US national interests.

15. (C) Human Rights Foundation President Yusuf Onen told us that the election of Obama had already improved the reputation of the US and would increase the USG's leverage in pushing Turkey to address perennial shortcomings such as a lack of freedom of expression, religion, and association. Ayhan Bilgen, Spokesperson for the Turkish Peace Assembly, an organization working to resolve the Kurdish issue, told us that many Kurdish activists believe Obama has the ability to convince Turkey to take tangible steps to end PKK terrorism by granting Kurdish cultural rights.

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